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THE FLIGHT OF FLORIMELL
BY WASHINGTON ALLSTON
City Appropriation, 1944

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO Washington Allston was one of the great names in American art. But the era of romantic culture to which he belonged passed away and was succeeded by several generations hostile to its ideals. The standard works on American painting were almost all written during the taste which succeeded romanticism, which was interested to prove the superiority of its own conception of art to what had gone before. Allston shared the general eclipse of his whole era, which for generations relegated American romantic painters to the storeroom of our museums. Within the past few years, however, a change of opinion has been taken place as it has been recognized that the preoccupations of romanticism are still with us and that their work has a very contemporary meaning. This interest has been felt in all the arts. A number of important books have recently appeared to re-survey the significance of our early nineteenth century literature. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, a very significant book in spite of its rather pretentious title, is an example. Last year Talbot Hamlin published *Greek Revival Architecture in America*, whose thesis is that this dominant development in the American architecture of the same period was not a "revival" but a distinguished and original new development. I am bringing out a book on *American Romantic Painting* this fall which attempts to give a bird's eye view of the painting of the period and to re-estimate its achievement. The romantic period gave form to the first independent movement of our national culture and it is important for us, if we are to understand ourselves as a nation, to know something of that age. Later in this year we have scheduled an exhibition of the painting of this period at the Museum. Before in the meantime we can announce the acquisition by gift and purchase of three important works of Washington Allston.

Allston was the most interesting and many-sided figure of the first generation of American romantic painters, who were active from about 1800 on. Before the appearance of American painters had been interested in portraits alone, to the practical exclusion of all other subjects and feelings. The later eighteenth century men, West, Copley and Trumbull, began to paint narrative pictures also but West and Copley went to England and Trumbull, discouraged by lack of patronage, abandoned his narrative paintings in the 1790's and did not return to the attempt for twenty years, by which time his talent was gone. Allston was the leader of a new generation which began to paint all aspects of life and nature in monumental and narrative pictures, genre paintings, still life, landscape.

Allston's life links romantic painting with the romantic literary movement. He was the brother-in-law of the Reverend William Ellery Channing and of the eloquent Dana, the poet and critic, and a friend of Washington Irving, and thus was closely connected with some of the most important influences in the first phase of our romantic literature. He was also an intimate friend of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Southey and he had in his studio at Cambridgeport a death mask of Keats which the painter Haydon had given him. Hawthorne's wife, who had artistic leanings, copied one of his pictures. Alcott made a pilgrimage to his studio to hear him talk about Coleridge. When he had a retrospective exhibition of his work in Chesnut Harding's studio in Boston in 1839, Margaret Fuller and Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote essays upon it and Emerson's essay on "Art" (not, it must be confessed, one of his major works) grew out of the discussions of it in the Transcendental Club. He was thus an influence upon the younger New England writers although the generation of the thirties had (with the exception of Hawthorne) a very different outlook.

Allston's work may be divided into two periods, before and after 1818. In the first period his work was grandiose, dramatic, mysterious, and often imposing in scale. During these years he worked in Boston, London, Paris and Rome. In 1818 he returned to spend the rest of his life in Boston and Cambridge. So little is known



of this period that the *Dictionary of American Biography* says his work came to an end in 1818. Actually the numerous pictures after that date are perhaps even more original and distinctive. We have acquired three pictures of this period, two—*The Flight of Florimell* and *The Italian Shepherd Boy*—from a remarkable group of ten pictures done in the first two years after his return, and one—the *Italian Landscape*—painted about ten years later for Samuel A. Eliot, the mayor of Boston and father of the famous president of Harvard. In between these was a long interval of eight years during which he worked almost exclusively upon his large picture of *Belshazzar's Feast*, a picture grown too famous upon the easel, which to the fascination and bewilderment of his contemporaries and to his own heart-break he never finished.

The mood of these three late pictures is a brooding reverie which Allston was the first to introduce into American painting and which has remained one of its most constant and distinctive moods ever since. Unlike his dramatic and grandiose earlier work these are, though large and simple in drawing, smaller and more intimate in feeling. Their tender and reflective mood reminds one of the opening phase of American romantic literature—the essays of Channing, the poetry of



Bryant and Richard Henry Dana, and especially, of the earliest of Hawthorne's tales which were written in the twenties, like the *Gentle Boy*. These muted delicate expressions of a mood of quietism were peculiar to the earliest phase of American literature, giving way in the forties and fifties to the more vigorous and confident tone of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman.

Florimell (1819) (purchased from City funds, Acc. no. 44.165), is an evocation of the mood of some lines in Spenser's "Faerie Queene" (one of Allston's favorites and, significantly, one of Hawthorne's favorite poems also):

All suddenly out of the thickest brush
Upon a milk-white palfrey all alone,
A goodly Lady did foreby them rush,
Whose face did seem as clear as christal stone,
And eke, through fear, as white as whale's bone.
Her garments all were wrought of beaten gold,
And all her steed with tinsel trappings shone,
Which fled so fast that nothing might him hold,
And scarce them leisure gave her passing to behold.

Florimell is a symbolic character whose adventures are scattered through a considerable

able portion of "Fairie Queene." This is her first entry, where she appears pursued by a fierce "churl" who is driven off by Prince Arthur and Sir Guyon, the two knights seen at the left (Book III, Canto I, stanzas 14-18; Canto IV and ff.).

The *Italian Shepherd Boy*, painted in 1819 for the Borland family, in whose possession it remained until the Museum acquired it as the gift of Dexter M. Ferry, Jr., (Acc. no. 44.166) introduced another aspect of the mood of reverie which was to be even more characteristic of Allston's American period. It is a figure of a dreaming boy seated in the half light of the forest; at the right is a vista in the forest where the golden light falls on a little waterfall. The plastic grace of the figure is a reminder that Allston was of the first generation of romantic painters who (like Prud'hon in France) were still in touch with the sculptural interests of classicism. Allston had known Thorwaldsen at Rome; his studio in Cambridgeport was full of casts of antique sculpture. But the plastic idea of the picture is embodied (as it is in *Florimell*) into a luminous harmony of color and light which creates the dream-like mood.

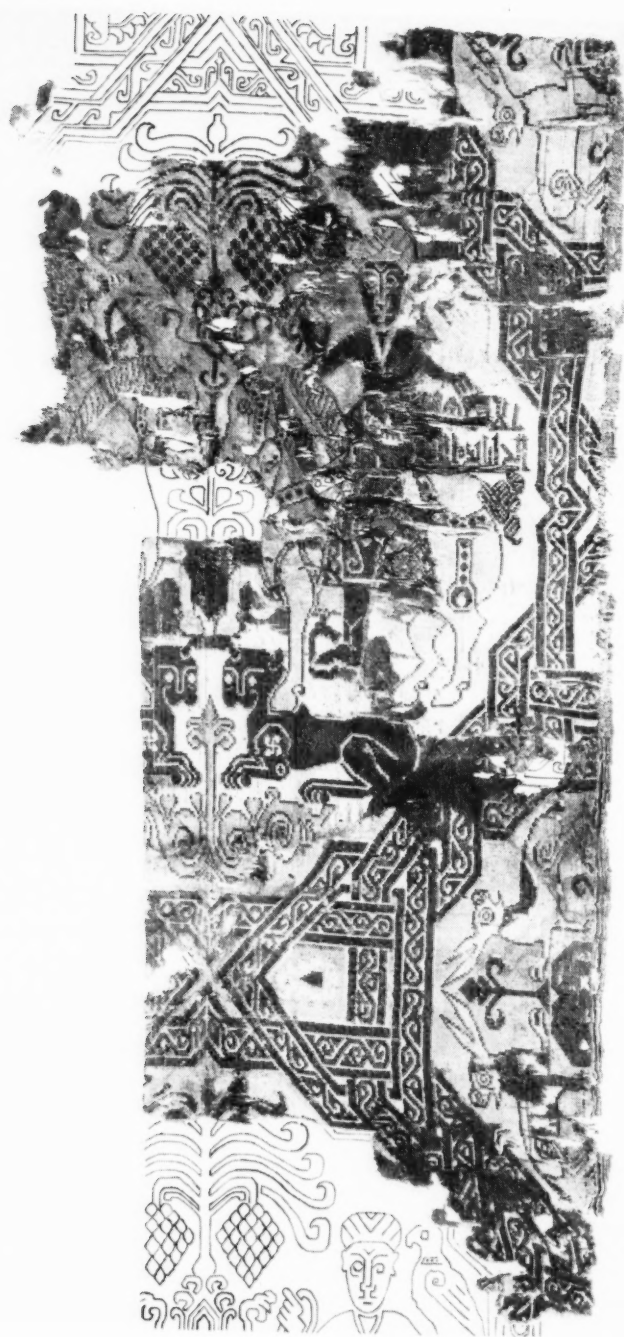
The *Italian Landscape* (the gift of Dexter M. Ferry, Jr., Acc. no. 43.31), painted twenty years after Allston left Italy, was a reverie upon the grandeur and beauty of the landscape about Rome—a landscape which was one of the great themes of romantic painting. It reminds one inevitably of the "souvenirs" of Italy which Corot began to paint fifteen or twenty years later. But while Corot's silver-green color harmonies were part of the French trend toward the cool palette of Impressionism, Allston's warmer, golden color was part of the creation of a more brunette palette, which was to be seen in American painting as late as Inness and Eakins. The mingled grandeur, tranquility and grace of this landscape made a great impression upon those who saw it in the exhibition of 1839. It is evident that to a New England culture no longer satisfied with a declining Calvinism, feeling its way toward a new imaginative life and new sources of feeling, these pictures revealed new veins of sentiment and reverie that were grateful and refreshing.

These three pictures represent the three main types of subject—imaginative, figure and landscape—which Allston painted after 1818.

E. P. RICHARDSON.



A CONSOLE OR PIER TABLE of carved walnut, with marble top, cockle shell knee ornaments and cabriole legs, American of the first quarter of the eighteenth century (Queen Anne style). Gift of the Gibbs-Williams Fund (Acc. no. 44.45).



THE FALCONER AND THE BLACK BEAST. Silk fabric, triple cloth brocaded, reversible, fragment of a tomb cover, Seljuk Persia, late XII to early XIII century.

Ribbons ornamented with a floral tendril are elaborately interlaced to frame compartments. The smaller of these contain crouching hares, confronted, looking backward as if scared, and a four-petaled blossom with pistils forming a flowery cross. The large compartments contain a strange design: on either side of a palm tree with pendent bunches of dates stands a cavalier, holding a falcon on one hand, raising the other in a gesture of salutation. His pale blue horse steps daintily, one fore-foot lifted, the other touching a black panther with a swastika marking the muscle of the thigh.

This composition harkens back to pre-Islamic times, when the Persians were ruled by the Sassanian dynasty and believed in the dual powers of Ahura Mazda and Ahriman. Clearly the shining horseman represents the Power of Good, the black monster the Power of Evil. As a design it is related to the Yezdegerd silk fabrics and many Sassanian silver bowls. But here the rider is not shown in profile, he turns toward and faces the beholder and is dressed in the fashion of around A. D. 1200, wearing a closefitting turban, knee-length tunic, high riding boots and a short sword or hunting-knife. The saddle rests on a cloth patterned with a trellis containing trefoils and crosses, the straps across the horse's chest and rump seem to be set with jewels. The colors are white, dark brown and light blue.

This is the only Seljuk textile known today that uses in its design the full human figure that was to become the great glory of the textile designs of the Sefevide renaissance, about three hundred and fifty years later. The twelfth century, when Persia was ruled by the Seljuk Turks, is one of the greatest periods in all ornamental art, especially in the designs of silk weaving. New ideas were brought from innermost Asia, technique also was enriched by the introduction of satin from China, although many Persian weavers preferred to elaborate the older cloth and twill weaves. Fragments of gaily patterned silken tomb covers have been discovered in the ruins of Rhages, a city near Teheran which was destroyed by the Mongols in 1221.

Gift of the Founders Society. Accession number 44.143. Length $22\frac{1}{4}$ inches; Width $10\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Selvage at right, patterns incomplete. Exhibited 2000 Years of Silk Weaving, catalogue number 60.

ADELE COULIN WEIBEL



GOLD DINAR, Sassanian, IV Century or later, slightly enlarged. The ruler represented on the obverse is possibly Yezdegerd I (397-417 A. D.). Unfortunately the coin has been cut down, so that the globe surmounting the crown is only partly visible. The reverse shows the fire altar of the Zoroastrian faith, flanked by two attendants with *barsom*, the sacred bundle of twigs, in hand. The Sassanian coinage was at first of silver only. In the third century the gold dinar was introduced, in competition and of equal value with the Roman aureus. Gift of the Laura H. Murphy Fund (Acc. no. 43.434).

A. C. W.

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